

The Clipper Visits... Rita Welch

By MARTHA HIMES

"It's born in you, if you see something that needs to be done, you do it. I always told the kids, if you see a vacuum, you just walk in it," Rita Welch said.

Over fifty years ago, Welch and her husband Frank saw a vacuum in elder care. When they opened their first nursing home, "there was nothing. There were poor farms. There were no programs at all," Welch said.



From its genesis as a mom-and-pop operation, the Welch Healthcare and Retirement Group has grown to an indus-

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try leader with approximately 1,800 employees. At the same time, the Welch family created and defined the elder care industry.

Welch's mother, Florence St. John, sparked the idea. From 1935 until World War II, the nurse opened her home to seniors, treating them as members of the family and caring for them with her daughters' help.

"My mother took in everybody who had a need. We just pushed over," Welch said. "I can remember the dining room table at Thanksgiving, we used to have strangers."

The young couple revisited that idea after Frank got out of the Navy. He knew he wanted to run his own business, and tried selling furniture and building houses. But when they bought a large Victorian home in Braintree, they realized that they could house elders in their spare rooms.

"It seemed to be like I was following in my mother's footsteps...We didn't buy it with the idea of taking in patients, we just bought the house, then we went on and took in a couple of patients. You could take in two without a license," Welch said.

By 1949 the Welches held a nursing home license and shared their home with approximately ten patients.

"The patients lived with us, basically. If we went out, they went out. If we had dinner, they had dinner. They were family," she said.



From the beginning, Welch, a licensed nurse, juggled child care and elder care. When they started the venture, the couple had three children.

"It wasn't easy," Welch conceded.

As their family grew to seven children, the Welches converted the barn into their home and expanded the house, by then known as the John Scott House, to accommodate more patients. By the 1960s, the John Scott House housed 125 patients.

The health care innovators were ahead of their time on two now-popular concepts: elder day care and independent senior apartment living. State regulators were not always appreciative of the couple's inventiveness.

"I had day care years ago," said Welch. "I almost lost my license over it. We'd take the patients in by the day. They crucified me. But the need was there."

Similarly, back in the 1970s they built the Colonial Village Apartments in Weymouth.

"I thought about where I would like to end up...I had the John Scott House, and we built the Colonial [Weymouth nursing home]...we built the Colonial Village Apartments next door to the nursing home with the idea that all these people don't really need nursing home care, if they had a home," Welch said.

Over the years the Welches built more facilities, until they owned a network of facilities of varying care levels around the South Shore. Additionally, the Welch Healthcare and Retirement Group provides home health care services throughout the South Shore.

The couple, now in their early 80s, retired from hands-on management twenty-six years ago, handing the reins over to their children. All seven have worked for the Welch Healthcare and Retirement Group at one time or another.

and manages facilities from Nantucket to Boston.

Not only was Welch in the forefront of the elder care industry as we know it today, she was also instrumental in creating the regulations that guide the industry.

Starting around 1950, the Board of Health began inspecting nursing homes and setting levels of care. The Board of Health wanted standards kept high, but the Welfare Department, which paid the bills, wanted costs kept low.

Welch, concerned that the Board of Health would put homes out of business and patients out on the street, banded together with her fellow nursing home administrators to create the Massachusetts Federation of Nursing Homes. The Federation worked with the state to draft regulations.

A decade later, Welch helped create Northeastern University's graduate program in nursing home administration. Additionally, she helped design a curriculum to teach practical nursing.

"We met in my living room, we formed a group, and had it all approved by Department of Public Health to teach the fundamentals of nursing. We called it CISAB, which is 'basic' spelled back-

wards. We spent hours training at the different hospitals across the state," she said.

Welch, the possessor of the state's first nursing home administrator license, chaired the committee that wrote the licensing exam. She and her husband are also licensed in New York.

The couple, now in their early 80s, retired from hands-on management twenty-six years ago, handing the reins over to their children. All seven have worked for the

Welch Healthcare and Retirement Group at one time or another; currently five are working for the company. Their backgrounds include social work, health care, business administration and religious education.

"My kids were well-prepared," Welch said.

The close-knit family now includes 24 grandchildren and nearly two dozen great-grandchildren, all of whom seem to be regular visitors to the couple's new single-family home at the Village at Duxbury, a facility developed and managed by the Welch Healthcare and Retirement Group.

Duxbury residents for about twenty years, the Welches recently sold their former home on Standish Shore and built their new home, one of thirty-five single-family residences affiliated with the Village. In doing so, they lived through the same decision-making process their customers have dealt with for years.

"You have to know when it's time, and it was time. [Frank] couldn't do the things he used to do, and it was bothering him. When you have a big house, and things to do, you want to be able to do it....First we were going to move to [an apartment in] the Village...we put a deposit on the place and we lost the deposit. We started to look at these plans...and realized, this is where we want to go, this is what we want to do. Best thing we ever did," she said.